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Music

Ramones Hammer Home

More to the point were the debut performances of several NYC-based bands, particularly the Ramones. It wasn't hard to hate 'em (myself included), but the Ramones brought home one solid truth — you didn't have to play guitar for 16 years to get up onstage and express yourself. Let's also not forget their undeniable influence upon the British punk groups, which in turn gave rise to the heavy manners whoopee ramalama whacked out by scores of beach punks nowadays. Also from New York, copies of fanzines *Punk* and *New York Rocker* surfaced in Los Angeles, further fueling the CBGB's scene.

Inspired by the tales of Television's Tom Verlaine creating a focus by literally building the stage of CBGB's, three L.A. groups, the Motels, the Dogs and the Pop, hired out Troupers Hall for what has come to be known as the "Radio Free Hollywood" concert, probably the first time (August '76) that anyone tried to present original rock bands in a setting outside the established L.A. rock venues. The Pop, as their name implies, were very Who-styled. The band went through about a million personnel changes over the next five years, recording some of L.A.'s first local singles (on BDM) and an album on their own Automatic label before being signed to Arista in late '79. After one LP, the pact was mutually dissolved, and the Pop are back with an EP on local independent Rhino, which is quite possibly where they belong. (More on this later.)

Meanwhile, another veteran outfit, the Mystic Knights of the Oingo Boingo, cut a devastatingly funny '40s-ish Patty Hearst satire, "You Got Your Baby Back," for the Pelican diskery. The group has since modernized itself and its monicker, now recording for IRS as Oingo Boingo. Speaking of modernization, KROQ returned to the airwaves (AM and FM) in October of '76, although with the exception of Rodney Bingenheimer's Sunday night showcase and the early madness of the Young Marquis (Doc Nemo) and, later, Frazier Smith, there really wasn't much to recommend anyway.

Masque Communications

One thing KROQ did contribute was the sponsorship of the short-lived Cabaret club, now Osko's disco. Along with the Valley's biker-chic Rock Corporation and Redondo Beach's cavernous Smokestack, later the Fleetwood, the Cabaret added to the ever-widening L.A. club circuit, supplementing the odd night at the Starwood or the Whisky as stomping grounds for the new sound. Though to be honest, a lot of the bands around town sounded horribly backdated even then. Witness the 1977 Warner Brothers signing of local heavy metalmongers Van Halen, who went on to instant megabucks after slugging it out for three years on the hall party/Gazzarri's side of the circuit.

Clearly something was missing. And regardless of whatever thoughts bubbled beneath Scottish expatriate Brendan Mullen's besotted brain when he first scoped out that Hollywood Boulevard basement, the Masque was the answer. Beginning as a rehearsal hall in June '77, within six months the Masque became the most notorious nitespot in Hollywood. The Sex Pistols-cum-Richard Hell fashion consciousness was coming into full bloom, and a number of former glitter rock fixtures (always up for a good show) mated with the latest generation of Hollywood streetlife to codify the style. It's been discussed before. Anyway, the place was packed, ideas and energy were exchanged, and an untold amount of bands slithered out of that dingy basement.

Similar efforts were attempted, including the Punk Palace and shows at the Orpheum Theater which featured the then-drummerless Weirdos (seminal L.A. hardline punk rock, still relatively active), the Zippers (hard-edged non-trendy pop group, still hanging in there) and the Nerves (a trio of S.F. transplants hawking their independent EP). The Nerves went relatively unnoticed by industry execs, despite their considerable potential: member Jack Lee ended up a contract songwriter, penning Blondie's "Hanging on the Telephone"; Paul Collins put together the Bay Area-based Beat, gathering a Columbia contract; and Peter Case piloted mainline rockers the Plimsouls to a Planet pact.

Slash Makes Splash

Concurrent with the rise of the Masque came *Slash* magazine. Combining low-cost newsprint with messianic, pharmaceutical zeal, *Slash*'s in-depth coverage of the more avant aspects of the local scene, i.e., the Masque-based bands, gave the 'zine tremendous street credibility. ("Hey, that's me on page 31.") The writing ranged from poor to infuriating, but there's nothing as powerful as an idea whose time has come, so the conceit worked. The publication is now dormant, with ace provocateur Kickboy Face (Claude Bessy) having returned to his native Europe, Bob Biggs currently heading up Slash Records, Chris D. fronting the revitalized Flesh Eaters, and the redoubtable Posh Boy (Robbie Fields) whipping out a steady stream of hardcore punk product for the beach market. Beyond *Slash*'s influence on shapeless young minds, its most significant achievement was to help create a radical left-wing alternative to the all-too-sterile scene. The memory of those infamous "Kim Fowley Presents New Wave" nights at the Whisky, spotlighting 14-year-olds' Kiss imitations, etc., were enough to make anybody bark at ants.

Other than the Masque-spawned groups, three noteworthy combos emerged. The Screamers parlayed striking looks, synthesizers, and a major gift for self-hype into near-legendary status (most likely related to how few gigs they actually played). The Germs, led by the dearly departed needlepoint artist Darby Crash (formerly Bobby Pyn), parroted a blend of old-style Iggy routines and total ineptitude into what passed for an art statement in this cheesy burg. Meanwhile, Orange County's Furys crossed Springsteen with the Who on a trio of local singles, but the group never really coalesced and eventually disbanded in the face of widespread indifference.

In due time, notoriety caught up with the Masque and it was ordered shuttered until the necessary safety code standards were met, blah blah blah. Incensed, the local punk community spearheaded a gala three-day Masque benefit in January '78, duly noted in Robert Hilburn's L.A. *Times* columns. In a rare show of solidarity, L.A.'s entire punk rock contingent assembled (only the most enlightened popsters dared to show). Among the groups who performed, including the previously mentioned Flesh Eaters, Screamers and Germs, were the Dils, the Deadbeats, Black Randy and the Metrosquad, Shock, F-Word, the Controllers, the Eyes, the Randoms and the Skulls, most of whom recorded at least something on local labels, mostly Dangerhouse and What? The Zeros (Bomp's '60s-centered punk group), the Bags (yawn), the Dickies (an A&M-signed Valley goofball act), the Plugz and the Alleycats (two hard-driving power trios bordering on a streamlined heavy metal sound), along with X, rounded out the bill. The event climaxed with a monster jam that began as "Gloria," but which, since few of the participants knew the tune, ended up as "Search and Destroy" with about 15 Iggy imitators gyrating onstage.

On the pop side of the fence, 20/20 appeared, later taking their brand of Beatles worship to a Portrait pact, and the Last debuted a folk-rock/punk hybrid that had some people talking. Unfortunately, the Last's lack of experience and weak production values marred their recorded output, a couple of independent 45s and a Bomp LP.

The Chinatown Sound: Wok & Roll

Things quieted down in the wake of the Masque's departure; not to mention the Sex Pistols' failure to dent the U.S. audience. (Bear in mind that most of the signings previously mentioned in this piece didn't happen until late '79 or early '80.) In the meantime, self-styled "bum vivant" Paul Greenstein convinced a Chinatown restaurant owner that booking local rock groups might improve her business. He was right, and following the customary policy disagreements, Madame ("He say F-word. Throw him out.") Wong sent Paul packing.

Nine months later (June '79), the Hong Kong Cafe opened across the courtyard from Madame Wong's, providing an alternative showcase for the dyed-in-the-scalp punk bands deemed too adventurous for the latter establishment. Unruffled, Greenstein went on to develop the original (La Brea) Blackie's, only to be aced out once again. By this time, Club 88 in West L.A., the Cuckoo's Nest in Costa Mesa and the Troubadour had begun regularly booking local rock acts.

Despite no mainstream commercial success, media coverage, particularly in the press, continued unabated. Many longtime fans shrugged their shoulders, figured the scene was better now than in previous years and kept right on going to the clubs. After all, thanks to the media, there were new bands popping up every week. The blossoming wasn't entirely due to media attention, however. The across-the-board success of such "new wave"

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photo by Anne Statman

Down the short hall of the Whisky's dressing rooms walked the big along with the forgotten

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